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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT, INL, G/TIP, CA/VO/F/P

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SUBJECT: GSL interdicts human smuggling attempts, highlighting new trend involving third country nationals

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 010033X Aug 03

- (B) Milan 476 (Notal)

- (C) Colombo 1267, and previous

(U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified -- Please handle accordingly.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In recent weeks, the GSL has interdicted several large-scale human smuggling attempts. Those netted in the raids (over 800 people) have overwhelmingly been third country nationals, mostly from India and Pakistan. This is a departure from an earlier trend involving mainly locals. The GSL is committed to combatting the problem, which seems to have been sparked by liberalized visa rules. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) INTERDICTIONS: In recent weeks, Sri Lankan authorities have interdicted several large-scale human smuggling attempts. The interdictions, most of which occurred in areas along Sri Lanka's southwest coast near Colombo, have included:

-- On June 23, Sri Lankan police arrested 166 people. Those arrested were mostly Pakistani, but included some Bangladeshis.

-- On June 30, police arrested 260 people, the vast majority of whom were Pakistani.

-- On July 17, police arrested 115 people. Most of those arrested were Indian, along with some Pakistanis.

-- On July 20, police arrested 114 people, most of whom were Indian.

-- On July 24, police arrested 174 people, most of whom were Indian and Pakistani nationals.

-- On July 31, police arrested 21 people from both India and Pakistan.

3. (SBU) While there have been some releases, most of the over 800 people arrested are still being detained for further investigation. Superintendent Samaratunga of the Criminal Investigative Division (CID) told us that only 33 individuals have been released thus far, leaving over 700 still in jail. (Note: See Para Seven regarding recent arrests of several alleged "kingpins," who were said to be orchestrating the operations.)

4. (SBU) THE LATEST TREND: Based on what we have picked up from the GSL, this latest trend in human smuggling seems to center on the use of the existing network of modified fishing trawlers that have been used in years past to try to smuggle Sri Lankans out of the country. (Note: Smuggling operations involving Sri Lankan nationals are said to still exist, but the authorities believe this sort of trafficking has sharply decreased in the past year as traffickers focus more on third country nationals -- see Refelts.) Using these modified vessels, the human smugglers make a roughly three-week trip across the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, where the illegal immigrants are transferred onto larger vessels. According to reports, if successful, many of the illegal immigrants wind up in Europe, especially Italy and Greece.

5. (SBU) THE ROLE OF VISA RULE CHANGES: According to the government, the demographic change in those smuggled out of Sri Lanka from locals to third country nationals is most likely due to two key developments. First and most importantly, Sri Lanka, in staggered phases, has allowed visitors from South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries to get visas on entry. In the past, citizen from SAARC countries had to get visas at the appropriate Sri Lankan embassy or consulate before traveling to Sri Lanka. The old rule allowed the GSL to do at least a modicum of screening of those intending to travel to Sri Lanka, which is not possible under the new rule. Second, direct air service to Sri Lanka from Pakistan recently reopened after a

long hiatus, providing a convenient method for Pakistani nationals to enter the country. (Note: Pakistan International Airlines recently restarted a thrice-weekly round-trip flight between Karachi and Colombo.)

16. (SBU) COMMENT: The Sri Lankan government seems fully committed to combatting the human smuggling problem. The Interior Ministry is focused on the issue, holding regular meetings with representatives of concerned local embassies. (Note: The Interior Ministry, for example, is also aware of the counterterrorism concerns involved when examining human smuggling operations. From what we understand, no CT nexus has been found involving the current crop of cases.)

17. (SBU) The police are also seized with the matter and, in recent days, they have arrested several alleged Sri Lankan "human smuggling kingpins." That said, the most logical move to counter the current human smuggling epidemic appears to involve the GSL's adjustment of visa rules for SAARC nationals back to the status quo ante (i.e., no visa on arrival). This is difficult to do, as the new rules have brought in a huge number of legitimate tourists, especially from India, which has helped buck up the island's fragile tourism industry. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE